

THE PENITENT

Drawings by Howard V. Brown

By ROY NORTON

Being the second of a series of stories, based on truth, of those who refused to surrender.

It required a kindly old General, a lawless ruffian, a scheming hypocrite, and a mere foolish boy to make up the combination. Those who believe in Chance will insist that Chance alone served to punish the hypocrite, to make the ruffian turn his ruffianism to a charitable end, to return lost honor to the General, and to save the boy from becoming a confirmed criminal; but others of us, old-fashioned perhaps, still believing in a Great Justice that dwells somewhere beyond our unseeing eyes, like to think that God Almighty, pitying, punishing, straightened out the threads.

The story is a safe one now. Time has released it; for the General died in bed, with a serene smile on his gentle face; the hypocrite passed to his reckoning from a prison cot; the lawless ruffian finished as he might have wished, "with his boots on," when fearlessly resisting a train robbery; and the foolish boy is the last alive, gray-haired now, and honored for uprightness and unfailing charity. But had he not, after that great mistake, resisted, struggled, and fought to "run straight," when tempted, despairing, and hopeless, there would have been no tale; for one doubts whether God Himself can utilize a "quitter."

All his life the boy had been pampered, provided for, and accustomed to such introductions as, "This is young John Steele—son of General Steele, you know," until it seemed the natural thing for him to receive deference. All his life he had traveled in the smoothed, refined way provided by that white-haired, white-bearded, grave-eyed, fine old veteran, and fatuously the boy grew up to believe that for him the way would be perpetually easy. He did not even appreciate the change in his prospects and career on the day his father called him into the library of the stately old home, gestured him to a seat beneath the portrait of the mother who had died that he might be ushered into existence, and told him that, through gross misfortune, they were financially broken. He wondered why his father, bent and quivering over the library table, should take the disaster so bitterly. True, it made him thoughtful when told that the home, with all its stately memories, would have to be sold, and that his father would then have barely a thousand or so dollars left; but that his university career was at least postponed, and that he would have to go to work, did not impress him as a hardship. The General, clutching the arms of his chair, appeared to take fresh courage from the boyish face opposite him, and said hopefully:

"You are just twenty-one—and twenty-one is an asset. I think I have found a place for you in a freight office, and I think I can get a government clerkship. They haven't entirely forgotten us old chaps of Civil War days, and—well, there must be some place for even a man as old as I."

Jack Steele did not regard it as unusual that he was promptly landed, through influence, as outside collector for the freight company. It was not unpleasant work; for wherever he went, from one big business house to another, he met but friendliness, and the very fact that his place was bestowed through influence carried with it into his office a certain respect. His hours were easy. All he had to do was to take his packet of expense bills, receipt for them, travel over the city at the company's expense, and return before the office closed to make his accounting.

The General borrowed money enough to go to Washington, where there was the promise of a job in the war office. The old home was for sale, and young Jack Steele was its only tenant. Meagerness of purse cut him off from old associates, and thus, left to his own resources, he blundered into a new night life that was at least quite gay to his unsophisticated eyes. He was amazed that there was so much fun in the world with



"He shrank back from something more terrifying than he had ever seen."

which he had never come in contact. It is a fact that he had scarcely learned to appreciate the smallness of his salary until the night chance acquaintance conducted him to a gambling house, where, with "beginner's luck," he won. It is a further testimony to his innocence that, in his further and frequent excursions to the same and other gambling resorts, he actually conceived the hope that he could win enough to save the home and relieve his father from the treadmill of work.

It is a further credit to his character that, on the night three months later when, panic-stricken, bolting like a frenzied horse, terrified by the news that the auditor was to check the accounts within the next twenty-four hours, and knowing himself a defaulter, he thought most of his father. He had learned that a thousand dollars of other people's money is a vast sum to lose; and shame, fright, and desperation lashed him where he cowered, a stowaway, penniless, and drenched by a drizzling rain, in the forward part of a river boat. His fears might have been lessened, and his bravery aroused for a return to face it out, had he known that he was to have more than three days' grace before his shortage was discovered; but that the cashier might conceive him to be ill, and the auditor be delayed, did not enter his mind.

BEFORE the defalcation was known Jack Steele, the fugitive, was almost to the Mexican border, and was actually across it before his bondsman was notified. Up in the office of the bonding company, a new and local concern, the president, J. Anthony Wardheim, "Pillar of Society," "Man of Affairs," "Great Financier," who was not only head of this company but also president of one bank, director of another, financial backer for a realty firm, and promoter of a street railway, heard the announcement with righteous indignation, and then softly smiled to himself.

This was the first loss the new company had met, and to make an example of a culprit so prominent in social circles would have two very satisfying results,—deter others in more responsible positions from similar mistakes, and give the company a vast amount of free advertising; for this case, owing to its being so closely connected with the name of the distinguished war veteran, would be a big news story. To capture and convict Jack Steele and to settle the loss might cost a couple of thousand dollars, and in return the bonding company would get perhaps ten or fifteen thousand dollars' worth of free advertising space. Hence J. Anthony Ward-

heim rubbed his hands with pleasure and smiled with sly satisfaction when, before leaving his offices for the evening, he ordered an investigation in behalf of the company.

He was still thinking of the incident as his liveried coachman drove him through the aristocratic section of the city on his homeward way, and thought more of it when he called for a halt to inspect a property, on the corner lawn of which a new sign, "For Sale, by Corydon Realty Co.," appeared in bold letters. A fine, dignified old mansion and broad grounds were those of "The General Steele Place," and Wardheim, a picture of prosperous benevolence, wondered whether or not it might pay him to dwell therein, as further evidence of success. Vaguely he recalled having heard that the General was in difficulties. Maybe this defalcation would help also to beat the price down. Taken all together, a pretty lucky day, he decided.

IN a cheap, respectable room, in a cheap, respectable boarding house, in Washington, at almost the same hour General Steele was reading for the third time, as if doubting his senses, a telegram from an old friend through whose recommendation Jack had secured his position. It read:

Boy has disappeared. Accused of defaulting with over thousand. Suggest you come if possible and see me first.

At midnight, walking blindly, bumping into prospective travelers, blank-eyed, white-faced, and tremulous-lipped, a very old man spent his last money buying his ticket West, and boarded a fast train. He sat in the day coach because he had not sufficient funds left to pay for a berth. And perhaps the latter expenditure would have been an extravagance, after all; for he did nothing but pace the aisle throughout the night, or stand and stare despairingly out of the windows into the darkness, muttering, "Jack! Jack! My boy! My son! It's not true! It can't be true!"

He learned at Corydon City that on certain occasions there were men so inflexibly righteous they had no mercy, the highly respected J. Anthony Wardheim being the particular man with whom he came in contact.

"I grieve deeply for you, General," said the president of the bonding company when the white-haired, prematurely stricken, broken-hearted old man appealed to him; "but you cannot expect me as head of my company to accept the sum of your son's theft, reimburse the freight company, and let the matter drop, as you